On Being Unconditionally Constructive

(Based on work from The Harvard Negotiation Project, especially the book by Roger Fisher and Scott Brown: Getting Together: Building Relationships as we Negotiate Penguin Books 1988)

Difficult interactions and conflict occur frequently in organizational life.

One common trap in such situations is to assume that if we act rationally, fairly, without blame, and with calm emotions, then others will or should automatically follow our lead with their behavior.

But, the stress of interpersonal difficulties causes everyone, at times, to fall into unproductive relational patterns. This can happen even when people have the best of intentions and skills. Starting with expectations that everyone will always act according to their best values puts us at substantial risk for disappointment or anger and then falling into our own problematic communication and behavior.

Even when we are able to achieve working together in a productive way, the chances are this capacity will fluctuate depending on the stress level.

It is better to assume that, under stress, reciprocal good will and behavior usually require ongoing hard work if they do occur at all.

Being unconditionally constructive is a powerful but highly demanding way to stay in a leadership role in tough interactions. It means always acting in ways that raise the chances of improving the ability to work together no matter what others do.

This practice does not guarantee agreement or shared values. It means that we try to find constructive ways to manage differences even if others are not.

This practice is also not about how to be ‘good.’ It is about how to be effective. (Fisher and Brown). There is not much chance for a very good outcome if all the participants in an interaction choose to fall victim to a contagion of counterproductive behavior.

Key practices of being unconditionally constructive include:

- Always look beyond the taking of fixed positions to find common interests.
- Always consider consulting with others before making any decisions.
- Always listen actively to others. Make sure they know you understand their views even if you disagree and even if they are critical of you.
• Always try to understand the observations and data on which others’ conclusions are based.
• Always sustain respect and accept others as worthy of consideration. Stay engaged.
• Always check your own stories and assumptions against observable facts and data.
• Always avoid attributing bad intentions to others even if their impact on you is negative.
• Always avoid blaming, judging, labeling, and expressing intense emotion.

Being unconditionally constructive does not mean abandoning what we care most about or giving in to placate or to be nice. In fact, a very important practice is to sustain clarity about our own goals, values, needs and concerns and also to communicate them clearly.

Being too quick to abandon or revise our best interests in reaction to the other party’s unconstructive behavior without careful reflection ends up being harmful to the partnership in the long run due to regret, frustration, or feelings of being coerced.

All difficult interactions present us with a choice. We can choose leadership through being unconditionally constructive and raise the chances for success as well as improving relationships. Or, we can abandon the leadership position and raise the chances of acting in destructive ways, making relationships more dysfunctional, and failing.

Additional Resources

• Contact Neil Baker MD at neil@njbaker.net if you have any questions. Also, see neilbakerconsulting.com for additional articles and tools. On the website you may also subscribe for free monthly updates on articles and blog posts.

• For more in depth trainings in these essential communication skills, please see the website for the American Academy on Communication in Healthcare (AACH) at aachonline.org and click on events.

About Neil Baker M.D.

Neil Baker M.D. works with healthcare organizations to enhance leadership and team impact through Leadership and Team Development In-the-Moment. This means making development as efficient as possible by focusing on immediate work challenges—using any work situation, even the most complex and difficult, as an opportunity to achieve immediate impact on quality of work relationships and on progress toward results.

He has developed these approaches as a leader, speaker, consultant, and executive coach for 30 years. Past positions include serving as Director of Psychiatric Inpatient Services at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver, Colorado; Medical Director of Quality at Group Health Cooperative in Seattle, Washington; and faculty and improvement advisor for
ten years for the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Currently, in addition to his consulting practice, he serves as faculty for the leadership track he created for the IHI—Project ECHO collaborative on improving access and office efficiency in primary care.

You can learn more and see client testimonials on his website at neilbakerconsulting.com